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COLLABORATIVE DECISIONS IN CONTEXT:
LOSS COMPENSATION IN NATIVE AMERICAN MUSEUM OBJECTS
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The complex issues surrounding the subject of loss compensation in Native American museum objects challenge us to expand our notions of what it means to preserve these materials. Major theoretical changes in North American anthropology have dovetailed with the evolution of many museums towards a philosophy and practice that is inclusive of Native American people. We see a new depth in Native American art history, too, in its exploration of the relationship between form and context and in its inclusion of Native perspectives (Nagy 1994).

The principal of inclusiveness seeks to move scholarship and museum practice away from an essentially colonial and objectifying relationship with Indian people toward a truly collaborative and facilitating one. Rick West, Director of the National Museum of the American Indian, has observed that past scholarship has not been so much wrong as incomplete (West 1993). Scholarship, in this sense, can be taken to include research, exhibits and conservation. As I will describe in this paper, conservation decisions can be greatly informed by collaborative considerations of the objects. Quite simply, inclusiveness is an opportunity for us to understand more about the objects we work with (Bernstein 1992).

Moreover, as anthropologist Michael Ames (1993) of the University of British Columbia has written, "It is not just a matter of listening to other voices or sharing curatorial responsibilities. A basic realignment of museum values and practices is required."

How are these new museum values defined and how are museum practices being realigned, particularly in conservation? How does inclusiveness of Indian people and diverse cultural perspectives and priorities lead us to do things in a different way? Through a discussion of loss compensation in American Indian museum objects, I will attempt to illustrate how new museum principles, particularly those that apply to the consideration of objects, are being integrated into conservation work at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology (part of the Museum of New Mexico system) in Santa Fe. Conversely, I will describe how questions raised by conservators have affected the way objects are considered curatorially. Conservation is not operating in isolation, but is integrated into the whole of the curatorial decision-making process by concerning itself with the bigger questions and applying them to the consideration of objects and their subsequent conservation. In this sense, conservators are attempting to deal with culturally diverse ideas of truth, beauty, and the exhibition thesis.

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At the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology, a radically new concept for the exhibition of Southwest Indian cultures has been evolving over the past four years. Through the entire structure of the exhibit process, and specifically for conservation, issues of cultural appropriation and representation are actively addressed. These terms refer to political and humanist notions about the way cultures and objects are represented, discussed and treated; who decides, who talks about them, and from whose perspectives. In addition, theoretical anthropological work, particularly in ethnoaesthetics and post-modernism (Ames 1992, Graburn 1976, Karp and Lavine 1991, Maquet 1986, McCracken 1990, Price 1989), have led to a broader concept of context, as well as a greater understanding of the complex layers of meanings held in the objects.

What has evolved for conservation at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture as a result of this work is a much greater emphasis on the decision-making process. Using what others have described as a Cubist approach (Thomas 1991, West 1993), the object is considered from many different perspectives at once. In collaboration with other specialists, the object and its condition are understood through museum documentation, including archival documents, historic photographs, reference collections and conservation records; through ethnographic literature, consultation with Indian scholars, artists and others, curatorial expertise, conservation examination, and technical analysis.

The intention of this decision-making process is two-fold; one, to place the object in as thorough a context as possible in order to come to an understanding of the object’s tangible and intangible meanings. We can then project the potential effect of conservation treatments on those meanings. The second goal is to increase awareness of our own culturally-based assumptions and aesthetic systems in an effort to avoid imposing them on objects during conservation treatment. Although cultural biases cannot be completely avoided, they can be minimized through the collaborative use of multiple perspectives and an investigation of the contextual history of the object.

As an example, a Southern Pueblo cooking pot with a large loss at the rim and wall is at the center of a controversy concerning its presentation in the new exhibit (fig. 1). One curator believes that the loss in the pot ought to be compensated so that it appears as a functional cooking pot in the exhibit; another curator would like to present the total contextual history of the object and show it in its current condition.

Driven by both practical and theoretical academic work, the object is understood within an expanded notion of context which includes not only the culture of origin, but the context of collecting and collector, of anthropology and anthropology museums, of curation and conservation, and the meanings these collections now hold for contemporary Indian people. This post-modern analysis of the museum object investigates social meanings embedded in the object
from the time of its manufacture to the present. Such an approach to the objects acknowledges that museums are Euro-American in conception, holding collections that reflect the biases and cultural contexts of the dominant culture. In other words, anthropology museums are as much about the culture of anthropology as they are about the cultures from which the objects were collected.

To begin to contextualize the cooking pot, we began with museum documentation in the form of accession records, record photographs, and field notes. From these we were able to conclude that the loss had occurred while in use at the pueblo and that it was not the result of a museum accident. In fact, the condition of the pot and its particular type are major factors in its having been donated to the museum at all.

Obviously, the pot could no longer be used for cooking with a loss that large, but damaged pots were recycled; the definition of an object’s function cannot be narrowly defined by the original intent. The ethnographic record shows that broken pots were used as chimneys or as containers for dry storage of, for example, grains or fruit (Dillingham 1990). In fact, the utilization of this damaged cooking pot as a dry food container is supported by museum research which suggests that the pot was bought as part of a large lot of pots from an old storeroom in a Santo Domingo Pueblo household. The pot, then, can be understood as both a cooking pot and a dry storage container.

Next, the curatorial staff is asked by the conservator to briefly explain the criteria for selection of an object and to describe its exhibit context; such information helps to determine the object’s presentation and treatment. It is worth noting that this practice on the part of Conservation has opened up a new, Museum-wide discussion about the selection of objects, how they are presented and why, and about the messages conveyed by presenting the objects in various conditions.

This Pueblo pot was selected because it is an example of cooking ware widely used in the Pueblos before 1880. This pottery type was rarely collected by museums or private collectors, in part because they are less decorative than, for example, polychrome water ollas. In addition, Southwest museum anthropologists of the early twentieth century were interested in classifying
pots stylistically by pueblo, and these unpainted utility wares did not support or help illustrate their thesis.

The Museum's Chief Curator, Dr. Bruce Bernstein, would like the loss to be compensated since the pot will be shown as a cooking pot and discussed in terms of that particular function. He also believes it disrespectful and somewhat insulting to Pueblo people to show broken things like this in a discussion about households. He believes this plays into certain negative stereotypes about Indian people and that it is part of the museum's mission to educate and dispel misconceptions. He would like to see a fill that integrates the object visually, but that is apparent at close range. However, Curator Dr. Rina Swentzell (Santa Clara Pueblo), feels very strongly that the loss in the pot should not be compensated under any circumstance; Dr. Swentzell made the point that pots were broken all the time in use and that one could see a whole range of conditions in a household where pots were used. Further, she feels that there is a kind of evocative beauty in objects showing damage through use, in contrast to Western notions of perfection (Naranjo 1993). Dr. Swentzell voiced the conviction that by filling the loss, we would be denying both the truth of this pot as a museum object, as well as its full history.

Dr. Swentzell articulates a Puebloan idea of cycles, of life and death, of deterioration and renewal. To physically stabilize an object, much less compensate a loss, is to freeze something in time, to deny the life of the thing as a changing entity. She, as well as two other curators at the Museum, Edmund Ladd (Zuni) and Gloria Emerson (Navajo), are very in favor of preventive conservation measures, but generally feel it inappropriate to reverse deterioration by compensating losses.

Structurally, the pot would be further stabilized by compensation of the loss; however, extra attention to careful handling would also prevent further damage. Therefore, there is no straightforward reason, from the conservator's point of view, to compensate the loss. In addition, potential information can be gleaned from technical examination of the exposed clay body at the broken edges, i.e. firing conditions, types of nonplastic inclusions, etc. However, since two curators are in favor of compensation because of the pot's exhibit context, several options for fills were presented. Variations in cellulosic hydrocal fills were described, including; fills made below the level of the original ceramic surface; smooth-surfaced fills at the level of the original ceramic surface painted in a flat, neutral color, or to match the pot. Textured compensations, just as fills in which the designs are "completed", involve hypothesizing about what was there, and so are no longer an option. The disadvantage of all these fills is that reversing them can be a messy affair carrying certain risks, and also that they require an intervention in the form of a barrier layer, usually an acrylic polymer, permanently altering the character of the exposed clay body at the broken edges.
Another potential solution was met with almost unanimous approval; this was to exhibit the pot in its uncompensated state, discuss its condition in the label text, and compensate the loss in a precise image, either a drawing or a digitized computer image, shown along with the pot. This way, the pot and its particular history are presented honestly, while, at the same time, the pot is shown whole, as it would have looked when it was used as a cooking pot. The pot would be seen in different ways simultaneously.

Balancing the preservation of the physical with the conceptual is a new challenge with each group of objects. Pueblo Kachina dolls present some of the most interesting problems for conservators, both on the physical and conceptual levels. The dolls were, and continue to be, made by people in the Rio Grande pueblos as well as at Zuni and Hopi pueblos. They were carved from a single piece of seasoned cottonwood root, although some parts, such as beaks, snouts, ears, and sometimes limbs were carved separately and attached with tiny wood dowels without the use of adhesive. As a result, parts can break off, and even slip off, the dowels.

The carved wooden figures under consideration were made in the 1920’s and 30’s at the Hopi villages by male initiates. They served as mnemonic devices for children and were generally given at the time of religious Kachina dances, although they might also be sold out of Hopi to non-Hopi buyers. They were hung in houses from rafters or on a wall with a hanging string, often resulting in paint abraded or lost at the back of the heads, backs, kilts and heels of these objects. Kachina dolls which are still in use today were made to educate, to be used up, and to eventually deteriorate.

Kachina dolls are regarded as sensitive objects by the Rio Grande pueblos as they represent, and indeed are believed to hold, spiritual aspects of deities. However, for historic reasons, they are not usually regarded as sensitive materials by the Western Pueblos of Hopi or Zuni. In this group of nineteen Kachina dolls selected for loan to a French museum, we observed various lost parts, missing feathers, and paint loss. Ought the losses be compensated? How do we collaboratively decide?

In answering these questions, ethnoaesthetic studies (Ames 1992, Graburn 1976, Karp and Lavine 1991, Maquet 1986, McCracken 1989, Otten 1971, Price 1989) offer important concepts that can be directly applied to the practice of conservation. One is that any given object holds
an entire aesthetic system, that system understood as the physical manifestation of a system of cultural meanings. For conservators, then, the object and its particular condition can be understood as a complex, multi-layered cultural document that, in collaboration with others, can be read, at least to some extent. Further, ethnoaesthetics utilize Native explanatory principles, that is, aesthetics are interpreted by the makers or society members themselves. These meanings are somewhat mutable and subjective, but nevertheless exist and may be as important to preserve as the physical object.

After many long discussions and visual reviews with both Pueblo and non-Indian curators, we developed an approach to the presentation of these particular Kachina dolls for this exhibit. These decisions are made on a case by case basis, each circumstance potentially leading us to different solutions. During our reviews, treatment options were described and considered in light of all that we knew about the objects, including cultural considerations. Cultural differences between Pueblo and non-Pueblo worldviews became apparent in the ways concepts and preservation issues for these objects were discussed.

In my linear mode of thought, the following guidelines seemed contradictory and mutually exclusive: that these objects were intended to deteriorate; that feathers should not be replaced, straightened or even stabilized; that it would be inappropriate to replace missing parts, but that some loose parts could be stabilized; that paint could be consolidated; and, further, that I could make one of the dolls "look its best" for loan by compensating minor, but very visually distracting, losses in the black face.

After weeks of trying to sort out all the seeming contradictions in what the Pueblo curators were saying about these objects and their preservation, an ethnologist finally pointed out to me that an understanding of the cultural use of conceptual hierarchy in these discussions could help me grasp what was being said. It was suggested to me that I think about what the Curator of Ethnology, Edmund Ladd, a Zuni man, said in chronological order, that there was a hierarchy in the guidelines expressed in a diminishing scale of importance. Furthermore, the hierarchy is accommodating and inclusive so that even if Mr. Ladd's first directive seemed to contradict the second, both could be carried out; however, the first has more importance attached to it than the second.

So, according to all the input that we (conservation and curatorial staff together) could synthesize, the fact that Kachina dolls were meant to deteriorate became the most important concept for these objects. We determined that they should not be made to look renewed; that drastically interventive measures such as replacing parts should not be carried out because the original act of creating the essential aspect of these objects is done in a certain manner. Although the missing part could be replicated, a proper, culturally-bound creation process cannot be reproduced, making the restored physical element "wrong".
The same idea holds true for feathers. It has been explained to me that feathers carry breath, that they are prayers in physical form and hold a particular and powerful place in Puebloan cosmology. Further, specific types of feathers are used for particular Kachina dolls. They were generally tied with cotton string and attached, often at the top of the head with a tiny wood peg. Many feathers were lost years ago to insects, or because of the wood dowel failing at some point. But, if the life of an object used in the Pueblo is seen as continuing in the museum environment - simply a new context - then the distinction between "damage in use" and "damage in the museum" becomes less important in conservation decisions.

Finally, Conservation was asked by both Indian and non-Indian curators to compensate several conspicuous paint losses in the black face mask of one Kachina doll. I proposed to paint Japanese tissue with an acrylic paint, cut out shapes to fit the losses and to attach them with carboxy methylcellulose, a very compatible material for these objects. I was able to achieve a matched color compensation that can be very easily and completely removed. Minimal intervention and easy reversibility have become exceedingly important criterion for conservation treatment at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture.

In closing, I would like to stress how important it is for our museum to document the decision-making process. I developed a special form for recording the various aspects of the decision-making process to aid in the synthesis of information and perspectives. Why am I proposing a particular treatment, or why do I propose to do nothing? It is an effort to bring long-held, and usually, culturally-based assumptions about what is means to conserve something into my awareness. It is an attempt to incorporate a more holistic and broad-based approach to the objects of another culture, a culture which may have a different ethos than mine as a EuroAmerican museum professional.

For those of us working with documented research collections in areas of the country with vital Native American, or other, communities, there is an opportunity to contextualize objects as fully as we know how. We are considering not only the tangible aspects of these objects, but the intangible as well; could we be destroying something intangible as we preserve the physical? Could the compensation of a physical loss ironically result in a loss of meaning?

What is my priority as a conservator of this particular material culture in the context of this exhibit, in this museum, in this part of the country?

What becomes clear in this process is that collaborative efforts allow us to look beyond what we already know, or think we know, to something more holistic and perhaps more reflective of the complicated cultural meanings held in the objects.
Finally, the decision-making process I describe has resulted in an unprecedented interest, integration and participation of the Museum at large in preservation issues. This collaborative venture is most definitely expanding my understanding of these objects and broadening my concept of conservation.

Bibliography


